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High on Cotopaxi

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Chapter 1

High on Cotopaxi

There's something captivating about volcanoes and the town of Latacunga has the scars to prove it. A town of some 55,000 inhabitants high in the Ecuadorian Andes, Latacunga has been completely destroyed three times over the last three centuries by its giant neighbour Cotopaxi. Cotopaxi is the highest active volcano in the world, but for now, it is a sleeping giant. The volcano has not measured any significant activity for nearly 30 years. Otherwise, I wouldn't dare to go near it. Carlos is going to be my guide on this trip. It's a quick one he promises, a two-hour drive south of Quito, the capital of Ecuador. After stopping to pick up some fruits from the

market, we're off along one of the more scenic sections of the Pan American Highway. Scenic yes, but bumpy. Don't stare too long at the numerous volcanoes out in the distance or pot holes the size of footballs will catch you off guard.

The road off the highway and into the Cotopaxi National Park is equally picturesque; the dense green of sub-tropical flora is sustained by the ever present mist in the air. The recent heavy rains have caused landslides in this area including the bridge on our trail to collapse. Not discouraged by this, Carlos decides to take us through the river. "We could backtrack to one of the other trails, but that would

take hours," he tells me as we head straight into the water. At this point, I should mention that a good 4x4 vehicle is a definite asset.

I say this because our four-wheel drive truck is immediately stuck in the river and the cabin is quickly flooded knee deep in near freezing glacial runoff. The four-wheel drive shifter appears to be stuck, and at the worst possible time. Luckily a construction crew spots us and pulls us out of the river. I'm hoping they're here to fix the bridge. Cotopaxi is exactly what you would expect a volcano to look like, perfectly conical with a permanent snow cap. As we drive up the base of the mountain, the terrain changes gradually from lush green to rocky and barren, almost moon-like. We manage to spot some wildlife in the park; an Andean condor and a herd of wild horses. At an altitude of 4,500 m we leave the truck behind, it is the highest it can take us. From here it's a 45-minute hike up steep, loose volcanic soil to the climbers' refuge. There is little here, but the refuge provides a much-needed break from the frigid winds at this altitude.

"If you like, we can climb the peak some time," Carlos suggests. Carlos has reached the summit three times. It takes 6 hours from here and ice climbing equipment is absolutely necessary. "The view of sunrise from the summit is breathtaking," he describes. At 5,900 m, every step can be breathtaking if you are not properly acclimatized. We hike a bit further up from the refuge and reach the edge of the snow cap, the furthest we'll be going today. Up here, I can see the peak reach towards the sky, an old lava ridge flowing to the base of the mountain like a misshapen caterpillar and the Andean range faintly across the horizon. Just as I contemplate the awe that

must have struck German geologist Wilheim Reiss when he first climbed the mountain in 1872, Carlos' mobile phone rings. "Yes, I took the 4x4. No, I didn't know the four-wheel drive shifter is broken!" At least it's good to know that if we get stuck again, help is only a phone call away.

Practical Information

Cotopaxi National Park is 60 km south of Quito and covers 34,000 hectares of mostly high alpine land. Most travel agencies in Quito organize day trips to Cotopaxi. Cost is about US$50pp.

It is possible to spend days hiking and camping in the park. Horseback riding is also an option and can be arranged from the city.

For the more adventurous, the climb to the summit is technical but not difficult. Organized trips usually include ice climbing equipment, starts in the afternoon and finishes around noon the next day. Cost is about US$150pp.

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About the Author

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